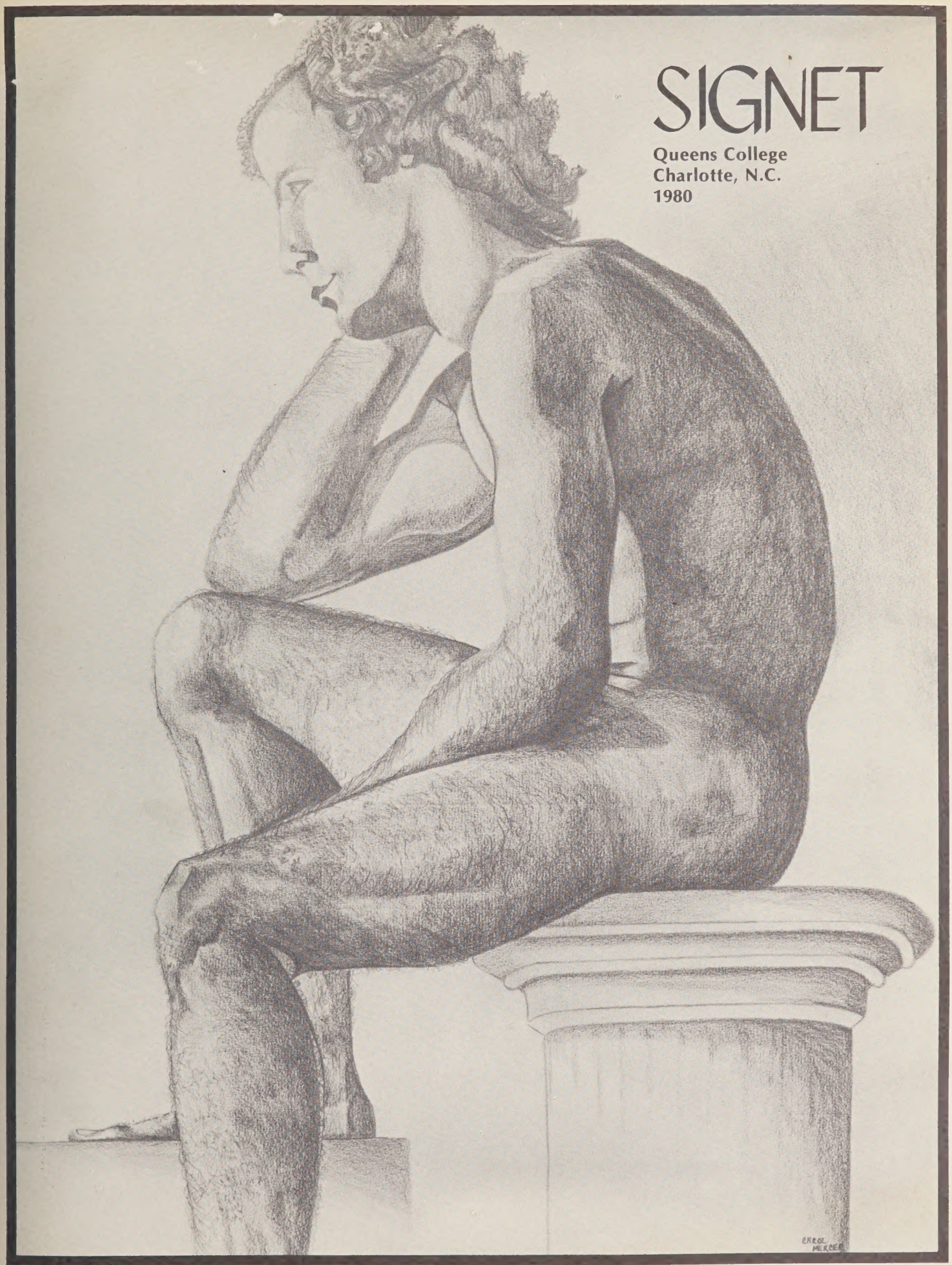
SIGNET
Queens College
Charlotte, N.C.
1980
CAROL MERCER

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Signet

Queens College
Charlotte, North Carolina
1980

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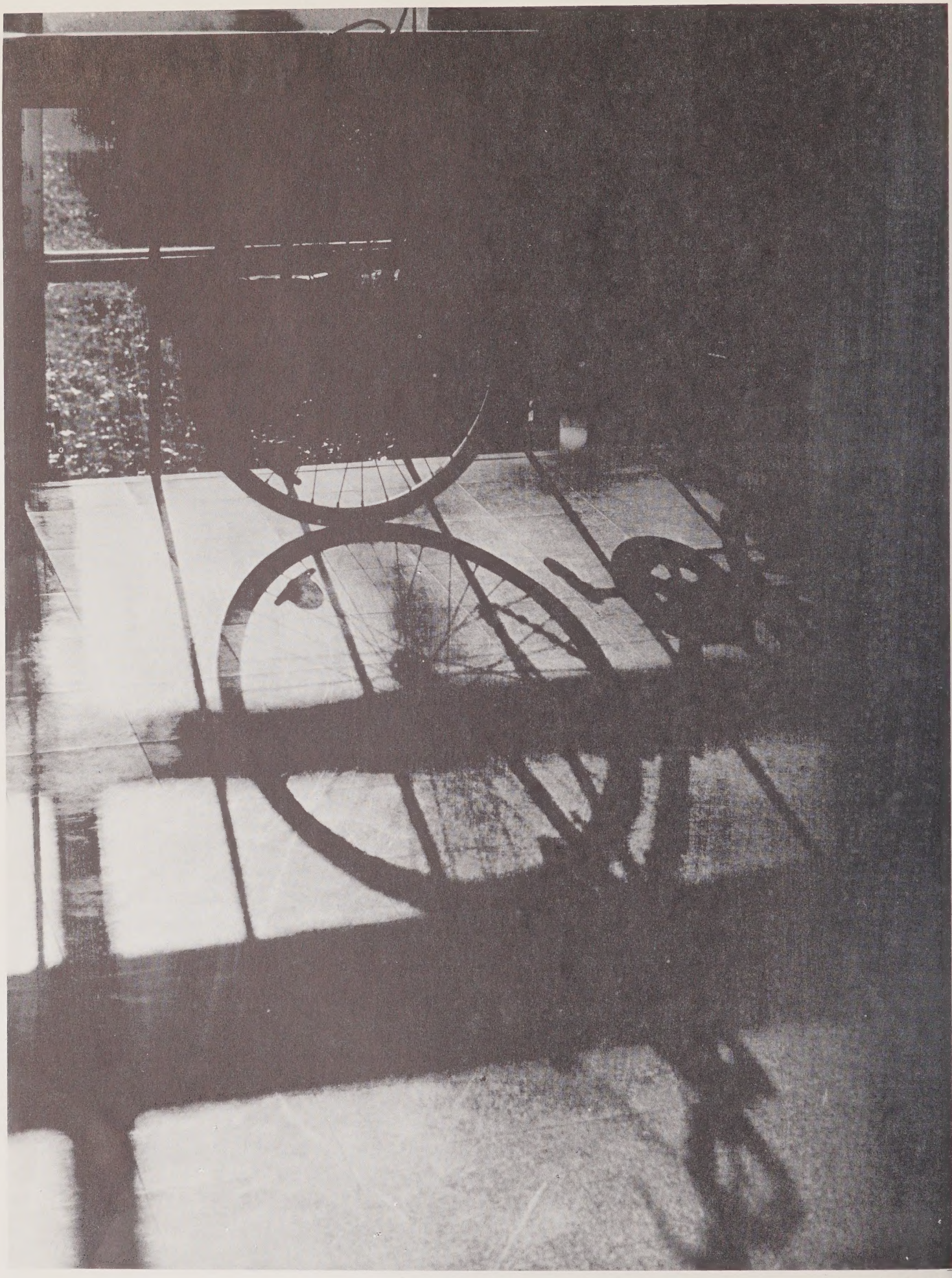

Jennifer Smith

Vine Street Rag

concrete
and dancing feet,
in taps
and top hats,
clapping like
Sunday come to meeting
puppet hands.
How exquisite,
on Vine Street
this fancy choreography,
everyone's
in step,
everyone's
got the beat,
everyone's
moving
without moving
their feet.
They're lazy
over on
Vine Street,
you've got
to hit 'em
over the head
with it,
twirl, sit,
pirouette
in with it,
wave your
hands
like hallelujah,
they'll catch on,
but they're
slow on
Vine Street.
"Hold the
African drums
Louie,
they're losing
the beat,"
they ain't
used to
syncopation
here on
Vine Street.

Bill Gouge

Another Conception

One late March day,
Mary was a -settin' in her cabin
Cardin' wool and starin' at the far,
When this strange feller come
And said, "Mary, you're gonna
Have a baby."
"Oh no, I ain't," she tole him
Right smart. "I ain't never
Laid with no man."
"Nevertheless" (he talked funny)
"Ye are." And she was.

She went off to hide awhile
With her cousin, Elizabeth,
And found that ole worman
Was expectin', too.
When Mary walked in the door,
Elizabeth's young'un knocked her
Such a wallop it like to nigh
Broke her ribs.
"The Lord has picked us"
They decided. That funny feller
Had been to see Elizabeth's Man, Zacharias, Too.

When Elizabeth's child come,
She said, "John."
Mary named her son "Jesus."
First come the flint, then the light.
They was kin.

Ann Matthews

As a child
I remember late at night
(my bed a boat)
being afraid to get up
and go to the bathroom
for fear of being eaten
by alligators in waters
choppy below.
And now
my boat drifts
and I am sometimes still afraid to step out
as my toes have been
snapped completely off
nearly five or six times,
but not by alligators
and for reasons different —

Linda Jennings

when i saw him
he was staring into space;
i knew that
if he could have
he surely would have
taken off his head
and held it in his hands.

i was on my way home.
it had been a
good walk
cool night
nice breeze; all
rather, beautiful, indeed
and, quite frankly, i
was full of myself
when i came upon this guy
this human loneliness
just standing there.
so i
figured i had nothing better
or worse
to do than be a friend.

we talked for quite some time
about
absolutely nothing in particular
'til
through tears he asked, in quiet screaming tones —
what am i gonna do? —
and
young sage that i was
(and am, i'll have you know)
i said
whatever you feel like doing.
go for it:
life ain't shit without risk.

he listened . . .
gazed at me with
disgustingly clear blue eyes,
smiled
a sweet smile
and then
he jumped.

i was
quite unexpectedly (and understandably) taken aback.
i didn't think that
that old bridge lent itself
too well to suicide and i rushed,
all help and helplessness, to the edge to watch
my brother, this crazy stranger,
fall to his greater reward.

he plummeted
down
down
with laughter on his breath
and before he
could smack the breast of that slimy river
before my very eyes
the sucker sprouted wings
and flew away.

then i laughed. i was proud of him.
i thought his choice was
pretty good . . .

risk
i thought
as i trudged my
silent, happy, sagely way back home
is
such a heady
heavy
awesomely delicious (and, oh, such a)
necessary
wine.

Alvin Johnson

Crystal Night/Kristallnacht: German Interlude

Sitting with a glass of wine,
sharing the table with strangers
whose faces range across
the mirrored portrait gallery
of yesterday.

Passing time
at the Zwischenakt,
an interlude before tomorrow,
seeking answers
in the glinting windows and goblets.

Will it happen again?
Will it happen there?

Dogs bark,
Eyes stare.

None reply,
None dare.

Dogs bite,
Eyes glare.

Change waltzes in slow motion.
Each decade a snail,
its protective shell
hugging the earth.
The past fits inside so well.

Dogs howl at electric moons.

Virginia Parkum

Like a jack-knife
Double-edged
You've cut me on both sides
Finely,
Cleanly,
Deeply,
With a wound to leave
A small exterior scar, at best,
You're good at that now
And give me an antiseptic glance
To make sure
There are
No complications
No infection
Or trace of side effect
To linger on
But I wonder
If one day when
Pulling your jack-knife
Out
To clean it or
Perhaps just admire its style
You discover that
Blades have no conscience
And what cuts one —
Cuts all.

Denise Boerckel

Winter Haiku

Orange moon, your tears
Burn icily
The streaked face
Of refrozen snow.

The striped yellow cat
Stretches, yawns,
Then nose to tail
Sleeps in winter sun.

Pink geraniums —
Country girls
Betrayed to bloom
By my west window.

On a dry brown branch
Of an abandoned
Christmas tree
A robin sings.

Sharon Culp

Denise Boerckel

Fantasy V

To escape a southern summer,
I dream an Irish moor
Where I walk ankle deep
In charismatic clover,
Green sedge, in the rain.

I traverse a flat saucer
Under an inverted cup
Of luminous gray, rimmed
Milky white. In the near distance,
I hear a sussurus, the sea.

Like a wet sheet for fever,
My clothes cling cool.
Rain-tipped lashes, rainbow prisms
Make me flush a covey of quail
Whose drumming, thundering swirl

My heartbeat echoes, awestruck
At the cease from silence,
At the need for laughter.

Ann Matthews

Rain Storm

We were celebrating
Eros uniting hearts
Tyrants of adverse persuasion
defying all that was sacred
living in spite of death
for the sake of life

Dionysos was in control
Our spirits were drenched
The deluge began sometime in the night
As Poseidon's water mingled souls

We were left stranded
Out of the rain
Spending our time well
Amused by the water dripping from the ceiling
and diffusing on the carpet below

Watery pellets
steadily falling
like our breathing

Jane McKinnon

And I've been
waiting all afternoon —
for the knock on the door —
for the rain to start
— would shield me well.

And where
is the method in
my madness —
the justification —

And where
is the rain —
you fill me up
like rain —

And where
is the thunder
to hide
my cry —

And where
is the lightning flash —
illuminating the diamond
raindrops in your eyes —

(And through it all —
a whispered innuendo
— would shield me)

So — sing your Sylvan Song
play your dulcimer
then —
rest in the solitude
of your soul —

Sing your Sylvan Song —
lure maidens
to dance rings around you —
encasing you
in their flashing fire —

(And through it all —
a voiceless cry
— would shield me —
but not well)

Tonya Wertz

Irene Hurst

Avalon Beach

I remember crabbing
on an old deserted pier
that once was railroad track
in Avalon Beach, New Jersey

I remember letting
down a crabbing cage
between ties and playing
with the string
like a yoyo
like bobbing for apples
in this case, crabs —

I remember getting
one and being scared to take it out —
no handcuffs for crabs —
Scared in the same way
that I was scared
of stepping on beached jellyfish
that same summer —

I remember boiling
them alive until redhot
and thinking, God, if I have to eat one,
I'll throw-up —
So instead the young connoiseur
ate an all-beef hot dog
well-done with just a spot of mustard

Linda Jennings

So many times I hear
  the rain these days
The warm cool
  I miss you it's been so long
Rain

So many times I hear
  the warm cool puddle in your eye
Rain
These days,
  These days I erect like staves
Against an angry sky
  That will not listen
A rain
  Against the lull of your senses,
A rain as hard and driving
  As the fire it rushes to meet —
A rain to meet your eyes
  And wash them
With the cry of the Ganges
  And the struggling child within you

Rain —
Hot
And at the dawn,
Hissing.

Denise Boerckel

Posing

We were celebrating
the Great Dionysia
on the patio by a pool
posing as great wells of thought images
drinking our reflection
from the murky water
feeling framed and on display
like pictures in third dimension

Jane McKinnon

Recognizance

it was first by firelight
that you saw me
although i had stalked you with
my mind's eye since dawn
and stubbornly refused to
meet your gaze as darkness
curled, purring, around
the wagons.

you said my eyes flashed fire
back into the night
as you bought me with gold
and came to lead me away in my chains
though i denied you my eyes as you
broke the banded metal at my ankles, wrists,
and neck glaring catlike into the darkness
from which i
had come.

standing, powdering hands on your thighs
you gave me your cloak and your hand —
i still can remember the murmured disbelief —
i received and wore both, stalked still silent
away at your side bound not
by canine leash and whip but
by your side bound by lines feline, invisible
tolerating touch which did not force
submission.

still i remember
still i remember these things
these times when both were bound
when both were thus set free.

K.G. Fesperman

for rusty

you are like a river to me.
ever flowing, in my life
  through it and
  out of it
going on, never stopping
  carrying me along
yet letting me be where i am
    i have you
  but i don't possess you
i never could
i never can
i never will
  yet, you are mine.
i have cleansed my soul in your waters
yet you remain clear, untarnished
  clean and wild
gentle and kind.
  you wear away my obstacles
  you leave the sediment of strength
  upon my bank
you cool me
  and ease my pain
    and cause me to glory
  in the fluidity of love.
    you are like a river to me

Alvin Johnson

And you are morning dance
a morning sun an afternoon
sigh, dance lightly in the
morning moonlight, dance
lightly and with one strike
of your heel light my morning
fire, dance lightly dragon-fly —
I feel you always, my morning
song.

And you are morning star,
first song on the first side
always first thing in the
morning, dance — I want to
see you morning dance to music
drawn from your alto sax soul
in perfect, measureless time
is how I want you, my morning
dance.

Tonya Wertz

faded
jaded
cynical i sit
i lie
shades of myself
years ago
turned around
sideways
sort of
some would say
at 21
perverted
inverted
as i was at 12
only now
having touched
knowing more
having loved
and
no matter what else they
say
love
doesn't weather softly
fade gently
like denim —
love dies.

K.G. Fesperman

is it wrong
  for what i'm doing?
i'm not hurting anyone —
  because no one knows?!
it's fascinating . . .
the experience . . .
electrifying —
a sudden thrust
  so intense
  — only i know —
my heart —
in a fast pulsating movement,
my lips quiver,
my hands are trembling.
my body so relaxed
  as if i'm saying
  thank-you.
the attendants
  escorting the body.
you can feel the heat
  from the fire.
  — Clang —
the door shut.
  Cremated.

Dena Nixon

A Message

A chilling late winter wind
rustled the leaves that clung desperately
to the lifeless branch
refusing to recycle

A message from you today
brain waves transmitted
by the US postal service
black ink on white card
 words scattered across the page
trying to fill the empty space
empty words
empty space
empty heart

Jane McKinnon

Poem

A government reservation
is too dark at night.
One lone rider
is always dazzled by
floating lights
and unused trees.
Only the oppossum
crawl gently
on solid yellow lines.

Mary Ann Farrell

I Shall But Love Thee Better

My pen, I knew, sang with a certain sweetness, but I had not realized its power. It brought Carl to me all the way from Texas.

The fact that he and his wife were born here, it was his vacation time and they wanted to visit relatives could have had something to do with his coming. But it had been my letters to him over the past year that brought him, driving a Porsche, carrying his clerical robes on a hanger, to my house that October day.

In June of the previous year, he had come to his hometown of Henderson, in the northern part of the state, to officiate at his sister's wedding. Mother and I had driven up for the occasion. There was a lot of hugging and kissing all around. We hadn't seen Carl for years and found him more handsome than ever, more at ease, warmer. At the reception, he was standing with his arm around me when a guest asked, "Carl, is this your wife?" He replied, "No. I would have married her years ago, but this state frowns on first cousins marrying each other."

Of course it wasn't true. He was in college when I was in junior high school. When I visited in their home, he treated me like his younger sisters. He married, moved far away, had a son and a daughter. I married, stayed here, and had two sons. I had heard him preach only once, soon after he was ordained as a Lutheran minister, and although I was proud of him, I wasn't particularly impressed.

This time I was impressed. An aunt of ours, a 69-year-old harridan was vociferously disapproving the morals of "our young people today." She was sure she'd be corroborated by the preacher. "Don't you think this generation is sinking deeper into the pit of sin, Carl?"

"No, Aunt Maude. I think they are more honest and more loving than we ever were. They seem to find a joy in life and the courage to live it as though it were a gift from God. It is, you know."

When I hugged him goodbye, I indicated that I thought he was an all right guy and that if he wanted to write to my teenage son or me, one of us would try to answer.

My son threw his letter away and forgot it. I answered mine. That was the beginning of a dialogue that taxed the postal service between here and Texas.

I cannot reproduce those letters — his to me or mine to him. God knows how we talked and what we talked about; books we had read or wanted each other to read, the way the sun looked shining through the fanlight over my door at eight o'clock on an August morning. He told me about the satisfaction he got from ministering to old folks in a home nearby, the stimulation of a recent seminar, his anticipation of a symphony in Houston, how he loved driving fast in his sports car, a funny joke. He tried to teach me a little philosophy, some psychology. I would fuss at him about his convoluted syntax, his erudition. He found more meaning in poems I sent than I had meant to put in them.

The delight was in two people revealing themselves to each other, two souls standing naked in the light of each other's eyes and finding that each thought the other beautiful.

As a child and a woman, I have been loved all my life — and I have never been so loved. He wrote, as I remember, in part:

> "Underneath your sardonic humor, I perceive that you don't like yourself as well as you should. When you were a little baby, Jean, your mother and father brought you to visit at our house. My mother let me sit in a big chair and hold you. I remember thinking then that you were a special creation, given to me for a minute, and my boy's heart loved you. I believe you believe you must work frantically for the approval of others — try harder, reach further, shine brighter — swim or sink. I shall tell you a secret, Jean. **You can float.** I don't mean by that that you should vegetate, but that you should relax. You don't have to **do** anything. All you have to do is **be**. That being, you, is totally acceptable to me and to anybody whom you let know you."

We never talked about the growing need we had for each other. There was no reason to. We both understood.

So when he came, he came like a visiting cousin in his Porsche with his clerical robe (he was preaching at a homecoming at the Henderson church on Sunday), and his wife. I fed them fried chicken. We talked about his mother and my father and who our cousin, Elizabeth, had married, and the children. He charmed my little son — told him funny stories, whizzed him around the block in his Porsche, letting him shift the gears. It was very cousinly until Mary declared that she was tired from the trip and was going to bed. My husband, relieved to be excused from talk about people he barely knew, went, too.

What is so callous as inevitability? If we touched each other we would lose each other. We both knew it, but we touched. His hands were magnificent, strong. I had to hold them.

"Jean,'I knew you were beautiful (Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, isn't it?) but in maturity, you're radiant. (Words were his profession.)

I had my head down on his chest so he couldn't see my eyes or my quivering chin.

"Don't be sad. I didn't come a thousand miles to make you sad. You've made me happier than I've ever been in my whole life." He lifted my chin and kissed me with a kind of fierce control I found it hard to match. "Somehow, sometime there's go to be a way. Now go to bed."

I lay there crying silently in the night because there was no way. I would — then or now — go to live with him in Texas or China or hell; but because we were who we were, there was no way.

The next morning after breakfast, Carl and I walked around the block. We crunched acorns under our feet. A gang of blackbirds, squabbling on the grass, made us smile. I called his attention to the reddening leaves of a big maple tree. "He turns every year right on the top of his head, like a man going bald — one spot on top, then a widening pate." It was a foolish simile, but I was trying to lessen our hurt. He remarked about the colors of October. "Like a laying on of hands," he said, "sort of like a benediction." As we approached the house again, we finally looked at each other and tried to smile. "Jean, I'll come back. As soon as I can, I'll come back."

It was ten o'clock when he roared off to Henderson and I went to work. At 10:30 he called me at the office. He was at a pay phone at a truckstop off the highway. We had to shout at each other. "Jean," he projected into the phone in his sonorous preacher voice. We had a great time. I don't think I remembered to thank you." Then, more softly, just audibly, "I love you. I'll always love you."

"I know."

"What?"

"I love you, too." I shouted, "but don't write. If you love me, don't write."

After I hung up, my office friends were looking at me with questions and a little concern.

"It's all right," I told them. "That was my cousin. He's a Lutheran minister." They nodded and smiled as though that explained everything.

Actually, it did.

Ann Matthews

---

heresy at fever pitch

somebody turned on the lights
  and all the heavy images
  with all their mean
    suggestions
became
the silly shadows
that scurried out the windows of
    my mind.
somebody
spoke the truth
and all the little lies with
which i had filled my cell
  became
nothing more than the
  dust that i'd collected
and didn't really want to sweep away.
    somebody spoke my name
    with love
  and all the silent scapegoats that
  i had herded in my pen
  vanished
  like the wisps of nothing
    that they really were . . .
  all my dreams and feelings
  that i'd so tightly made,
    all the silly secrets
  that i thought i'd hidden well
  have come unraveled in the light;
    they have been
  diminished in the scope
    of what is true
    which is
    that
  i'm no longer victimized
no more rejected nor am i criticized —
  i'm not the poor young
    orphan
left to die;
  i no longer am the beggar
  or the scarecrow
  or bad weather
that comes to plague the
  kindness of my friends.

  i'm the light that chased the
    darkness —
  i'm the truth
that clothed the starkness
of the naked soul that i found
    out was
    myself.

and i
am certainly,
  fervently,
    laughingly, and with sweet gladness,
    proud that
  the someone
that finally came along
    was me.

Alvin Johnson

Carol Mercer

It was a night of unusual events —
Just you and me and one of those
late night marathons
Where everything is real and nothing is sacred
And I had just said
"Isn't it stupid we can't treat each
other as people and
Stop playing games?"
When you played your liberated trump
And said "Come on back to my room
so we don't keep everyone up"
And later you cried,
And said how she'd
Done you wrong,
You said it'd been so long
Since someone just held you
And this crazy tune
Kept running through my head
Like an old Andrews sisters record
With your
"You vex me baby, you vex me"
in the background
But when I sang
"In the mood — uh-uh"
You didn't think it was so funny anymore
And threw my womanhood
up in my face
And questioned my ability
to respond
And though you had a cattiness
that belied your sex
I pulled one on you
And left you to "rest"
While I went to the bathroom
I later looked in on your
little man snores
Another rough night
Another blown score.

Denise Boerckel

Confusion enwrapped —
the entrapment of uncertainty,
As that bright prism
of promise
Is shattered
into a puddle of darkness —
You've lost that
ecstatic feeling.

Carla Van Cleave

When Mourning becomes Electra

When mourning
becomes Electra
becomes crystalline clear
in a semi-psychologist's
tape-recorder —
Sister —
The name of my father's mistress
all in clouded formations
of imagination
dreaming of bedtime stories
with no substantial plot —
All of this leading to a realization
that hits
like the smell of sticky sheets
in a sweltering summer heat —
And now, sister,
through Electra images in your mirror
you may finally
allow yourself
orgasm —

Linda Jennings

spear me the pain!
young, egotistical
self-proclaimed lover
jackets flapping to the slow grind
of barry white on the stereo

and like the slick nervous jerk
of a channel catfish
you love me
but, please,
spear me the pain!

this tingle is much too temporary
reverberating
deliberating
on that anticlimatic line
where the needle scratches

Jane Splawn

Even though I've never been
the devoutly religious type,
I think I'll make a couple of
Biblical references — see,
I've changed my mind — it
was always my perogative —
for, where once I couldn't see
your eyes for the crown of thorns
you wore woven tightly around your
head — I see now you'd visioned
yourself as my Savior —
keeper of my heart and soul —
mind and body —
  But like Pilate,
I want to wash my hands
of this whole affair —
It's just too much for me and
more than I'd bargained for . . .
  So I'm sending you on
to Herod — you can prove to him
you're King of all Souls,
All minds, all bodies —
and while you're busy saving
everybody else, don't forget
to save yourself.
  Because even though I can't
crucify you, other people can.
And even though my anger has
finally burned itself out, and
only a smoldering apathy remains,
I'd still hate to watch you
hang yourself blindly on your
homemade cross.
  And I'm sorry you're thirsty,
but I'm fresh out of vinegar and
I gave away my last
  guaranteed-every-time resurrection pill
yesterday.

Tonya Wertz

The Prophet

Leaving the fortune teller of fate
  you would never see
  what you really saw.
  Behind the fire in your eyes
  that singes my vision
  of God and death,
  I saw the twirling prism on your wall
  catch and throw the refracted colors
  back in my face;
  As you did with your demented vocabulary.
  But the words only blind
  and build walls
  that lock me away
  safer now without you.

Susan Westphal

Another game playing
hide and seek emotions —
hiding all along, we've
played in our playhouse
where there were no windows
for you to climb out of as
I look for you, blind-folded
and reaching out to find you —
  I never could

And once we played
hide and seek I caught you but
you said it didn't count and
called me a cheater because
I peeked but I just wanted
to catch you and it's only
a game . . .

So I'm going home now and
I'm never going to play
with you again because
I'm tired of always
  being
    'It.'

Tonya Wertz

i guess i just never learn
do i

i thought the time was
long gone when you could
hurt me
intentionally — or unintentionally —
which usually hurts worse

but
here i stood
simply stood
and in your turning to go —
not an unusual act —
you sliced me open
again
from chin to hip — a diagonal

and i
like a fool
bled

and like a fool
i told you i did not bleed

and you believed me.

K.G. Fesperman

Then there was the time
that you imprinted
your hand
in the side of my face
for no apparent reason —
It was like the time
daddy hit that tiny sparrow
on the way home from church
that Sunday —
the bird flew away stunned
but daddy never tried to
slow down —

Principles

And I never forgave either one of you for it.

Linda Jennings

Icarus Observed

Gold sun rays
burned black your eyes
while your heart glowed red.
Your mouth, seeking to suck
the warmth of life,
gasped grasping salt
from tears and ocean's milk.

Before you fell,
did you see
that for which you rose?
Or did the fire of no's
make ashes of your search
for the soul's yes.

In the spiraled arcs
of your flaming trail
do we see passion or despair?
Or feathers drifting in the air.

Virginia Parkum

I am coming home again
riding the road at night.
I've left behind the life I'm trying
going toward what is made.

It's late at night
the dark sky rushes
past trees and houses
and side roads.

Just give me the radio
no cars on the road
and fast moving earth past me.

I love it then,
don't you know,
to be alone just riding.

Jackson Browne's past Charlotte and I've passed Bear Creek.
A flight song
for hills, valleys and two lane roads.

I've made the trip before.

Night closes in
I settle in,
a car passes once or twice.

I like the flight songs best,
anything hard.
Turn off the air machine
and just let the night in
and the music on
and the hills rolling past.

Night flight
and I'm alone, best alone.
Rocking to hear it loud.
Change the numbers quick,
get something better,
something with gut
to sail me on again.

Old ones are best
something surprising
J.J. Jackson, the Four Tops,
early Taylor.

You run by the shadows of trees
and look at the midnight fog.
Give me night singers.
Give me something to be,
someone to be,
a song to be
for the moment fly higher,
come down

change the music and find another tour.

Mary Ann Farrell

It all started as a joke . . .
Analytical neutrality —
That night we were
Playing psychological games,
As if in a play.
But now I see the
Foreshadowing,
As I've shifted gears
  Lower
    Lower,
Until I've hit neutral
Out of necessity,
Because you and I both know
It's much too clouded,
Much too Freudian,
To joke around anymore,
And it's much too tender
For me to fight
Out of pride.
Because I never thought
It was a game —
And winning or losing
Are as far apart from it
As we are now.
So I've stepped between
The fine lines
For a breather.
And I've a feeling
It will be a deep one —
But never, ever
A sigh.

Denise Boerckel

It was the one time
after Kennedy was
shot or something
and I jumped
over the crawlspace wall
  in the basement
and hit the freshly
laid tarp —
(cold on the toes but
it didn't matter —)
And I held a luger
in my left palm —
the one I got from Christmas
that year —
And as I peered over
the edge I saw someone
over by the oven so
I aimed and pulled
and as I smelled sulfur
heard a clap —
You looked at me like some
streetside tombstone peddler
and fell into the
cardboard refrigerator —
I never dreamed
I'd see a make believe
ghost again
at least not those eyes
And what was it
they said that a good dead
boy gets, anyway?

Linda Jennings

From your vacuum relationship
  you're finally free.
Spend your days hoping
his lifeblood has been sucked
by that same vacuum that
  swallowed you whole —
feet first —
A slow, agonizing death-birth
where you made sure the last thing
he saw was your frozen martyred
gaze as your bloody lips dripped
"O" and you were sucked in,
you know, feet first —
  And now trip lightly home —
your pocketbook a used vacuum bag
that you dump full of fresh trash
on the kitchen table. Like a magpie,
hoarding bright bric 'a' brac —
you crow over your treasures:
  For there in the dirt and fluff
you've finally found yourself —
  Staring upward —
A broken reflection
  and seven years bad luck.

Tonya Wertz

creative force

i am the scribe
  who gives up his pen,
love is the poet
  who writes down the words;
i am the singer
  who sings from the heart.
love is the song
  that gives me release.

i am the sculptor
  that calls out to stone,
love is the message,
  that touches stone's ear;
i am the dancer
  in body and form,
love is the teacher
  love is the dance.

all of the things that make our loves real —
  all of the songs
and expressions of peace —
  are
written by love;
we are only the tools.
  listen to love, then —
create as you love.

Alvin Johnson

and you lay there
glistening
wet as ink on a fresh new poem
newborn
reborn
of so much more than the words
and passions which burn through
long winter nights
leaving only smouldering and dying coals
on which grey dawn's frigid touch
fell
like so many tons of shattering
splintering ice
falling
ripping living limbs away
which could stand no more

but you
yes
you
who never lie to me
only next to me
are **still** with me
warm and sweet
your touch incense to my night.

K.G. Fesperman

Sanctification Comes To Town

At the time the United States got prohibition, our church got a new preacher. Members who claimed they had worked hard to vote away the root of all evils, thought getting the new minister was their reward. Others looked upon getting a minister with a doctorate in Theology as well as a law degree as simply their good fortune.

A lawyer turned minister, Dr. Hiram Whittaker came to us ready to devote his life to serving as a spiritual guide to a congregation of low-income people. In our town, he had an ample opportunity to fulfill his goal because in the 1920s, cotton mill work barely brought in enough wages for a family to function on sub-standard levels, which at times "sorely tried" their faith.

In the Whittakers, we Baptists found that voting out whiskey and voting in Dr. Whittaker was more than we had bargained for. Bootleggers took over the town and Dr. Whittaker took over the community along with his parishioners.

A man of vision, he came to us at a time our church members' eyes were blurred to anything that suggested change. However, Dr. Whittaker with his wife maneuvered us hard-shell Southern Baptists until they had the entire congregation backing them in their pursuits. Ahead of their time, the Whittakers were progressive liberals but none of our ultra-conservative members caught on to this as we followed our spiritual leaders into doing things that should have been impossible missions.

A towering man with the build of a blacksmith, Dr. Whittaker possessed piercing blue eyes that when cast upon female members, left them ready to bake pies for financial projects or give cash donations to clothe naked foreign children. Today, women would term his eyes "sexy." Back then, they settled for the more sedate description of "persuasive."

Elta Mae, Dr. Whittaker's petite wife, wore a perpetual flirtish smile on her face and her rosy cheeks dented in with dimples as big and deep as a thimble. She kept her shapely body adorned in the latest fashions that bordered on the flapper side. The combination of dimples and stylishly covered curves worked magic on both females and males. Everyone seemed anxious to win her approval and was eager to do her biddings.

The Whittakers were a charmed couple that made even the hard shells want to unlossen their straight lacings so they could get within their circle of Christian actions. I thought the handsome couple perfect; and, to me, Dr. Whittaker always knew just the right thing to do.

We Baptist had always had the reputation for having the biggest congregation and the most entertaining services in

town. Our attendance stayed consistently high because to be absent from a service made the absent member miss out on more than the sermon. He was left out of knowing tomorrow's gossip in advance. Like the Bible, our services had a little bit of everything. In addition to our church providing salvation, the services were also sparked with good music and funny incidents. Our democratic way of letting everyone speak his piece made for some exciting statements to be heard. On top of all this, our membership boasted some of the town's outstanding characters, especially female ones whose actions the entire town took note of.

There was Mrs. Perkins whose husband owned the barber shop, one of the town's most thriving businesses. Her husband's establishment not only offered haircuts, shaves and shoe shines, but also hot shower facilities. Almost as wide as she was tall, Mrs. Perkins loved jewelry as much as she liked to sing. She was proud of her jewels and her voice and strove to show both off at church. She wore ear bobs in her ears, jeweled strings around her neck and rings on her fingers. When I saw her, my eyes were drawn to her feet where I experienced disappointment in not seeing bells on her toes.

Mrs. Baker was the mill boss man's wife. Her husband was the one who hired and fired mill hands. Most workers did not know who owned the town's mill, but everyone knew Mr. Baker was the man who dealt out eat or starve verdicts to the mill laborers. Daddy, who served on the deacon board with Mr. Baker, was always hurt because Mr. Baker seemed to have something to whisper about to a small group of men but never had anything to whisper to him. Mrs. Baker, on the other, talked and whispered to everyone. The most outstanding feature about Mrs. Baker was her hair. She had it so tightly marcelled on Sundays that, when I got near her, I imagined I could smell her curling irons. She caught her crimpled-waved hair at the nape of her neck in a dressy, twirling bun that was held in place by a large fancy hair pin set with colored glass chips that caught the light as it poured into the sanctuary from plain glass windows. I liked to sit several rows behind her where I could play a guessing game in counting the number of shining stones in her hair pin.

Mrs. Perkins and Mrs. Baker held a race each Sunday to see which one could sit in the pew on the second row right in front of the pulpit. I figured sitting in that spot must have enabled them to get the full blast from preacher Whittaker's eyes. Mrs. Perkins especially liked that seat because as well as putting her in front of Dr. Whittaker's gaze, it placed her near the choir. She liked to sing but preferred to sit with the congregation dressed in her jewels and Sunday best instead of sitting in the choir loft draped in a white robe. Mrs. Perkins did not only do a singalong with the choir, she outsung it in volume. One morning she got so carried away with singing "Bringing In The Sheaves," that when she got to the part "We shall come rejoicing," as she hit on the "We," she couldn't stop but kept blasting forth "Weeeeee . . ." Ole Homer Pruitt, a member of the choir and the town's volunteer fire department, hearing her "Weeees," thought it was the town's fire siren going off. He threw off his choir robe and dashed out the back of the church to go fight the fire. Even Dr. Whittaker had to take a gulp of water to keep from poppin' at Mr. Pruitt's hasty departure.

The Sunday the women busted their corsets to keep from laughing was the morning Mrs. Perkins came in later for services than Mrs. Baker and had to take the seat in back of her. With her corset laced up tight, the late comer struggled to bend enough to get past knees to the middle section of the pew. She had to lean so far over, that one of her coat buttons caught in the fancy hair pin holding Mrs. Baker's bun in place. The whole church held its breath as Mrs. Baker's hair started moving along with Mrs. Perkins as she made her way to her seat. That carefully marcelled hair of Mrs. Baker's turned out to be a wig.

Mr. Baker never went to the Perkins' City Barber Shop after that. He started making regular Saturday trips to a neighboring town to have his barbering done.

Dr. Whittaker won the hearts of the entire town along with his church members when he started preaching against bootleggers, gamblers and women of the night who were giving our town a bad name. His preaching set a number of men on the righteous path and led them to the altar where they pledged to give up their wicked ways of living. The preacher worked and prayed so hard to rid the town of vice that the Ku Klux Klan joined his crusade to impress on hearty males and loose females that their sinful ways would lead them to eternal fire. Fresh from attending a big march held at the Nation's capitol in 1926, the Klan inspired by Dr. Whittaker's fight on vice, started burning crosses in front of homes where men were known to spend their money on either gambling, bootleg whiskey or loose women. The Klansmen burned so many crosses in one night that some people in the countryside saw the glow and came into town to find out if the town was on fire.

Atending church one hot summer night during the time Dr. Whittaker and the Klan were making war against sinful living, I was on a back pew while mama and daddy sat toward the front of the church. Although mama kept telling me I was too big of a girl now to lie on the church bench, I did. I thought I was dreaming of heaven and angels when I saw visions of things in white pass by my aisle. I sat up to look and saw hooded figures lined up on both aisles leading to the altar. When Dr. Whittaker opened his eyes from prayer and saw the two lines of white-sheeted persons coming toward him, he appeared shaken and after saying the "Amen," stood motionless as one of the robed figures went up to him and handed something that turned out to be a man's purse. Through hood-covered lids, the Klan member expressed appreciation to Dr. Whittaker for his help in running gamblers and whores out of town and for bringing bootleggers back to Godly pursuits.

As the hooded Klansmen turned to the rear of the church to march out, a breeze through an opened window blew one of the hood's back from a man's face as he passed by me. His expression changed from dismay to a menacing glare as his eyes caught mine with a threatening look that let me know I had better forget who I was looking at, and I did. The Klansman was Mr. Baker, the man who hired my daddy at the mill.

When the service was over, I kept lying on the seat after everyone had left except for Dr. and Mrs. Whittaker. I stood up to watch them as they counted the money in the purse. I heard Dr. Whittaker say, "Elta Mae. There are twenty-five silver dollars in this purse. Hand me the collection plate. I think this money should serve the Lord rather than me."

That was Dr. Whittaker. He always KNEW just what to do.

Lisa Smith

Jennifer Smith

The one with
the red,
Viking-horned
head
and the
zoot-suit
did a snap-dragon
shuffle
into grandfather's
barn,
donned confusions blanket,
wrapped and tied
like a cocoon,
and did a
tight-rope
high sky dive
into a
cheap
frayed
net,
with applause,
because
it'll damn well
teach you
that you don't
break the rules
around these parts
without paying the
consequences.
So the business
middle class
skin
flaked off
and crawled up
snarling
"I'll cut you
quick as glass,
I've been living
too long with
a pain in the ass
to deal with
your injection
exposure
parlor game,"
then stuck out
his skinny,
business, middle-class
lip and walked
away
smiling big as
God,

and the others,
like monks in
two non-color
suits
chanted
"Make the zoot-suit
red-head
turn his back
and leave,"
over and over
breathless as the wind,
But the one with
the red,
Viking-horned
head,
and the zoot-suit
in Grandfather's barn
exposed
hands that were razors,
and he slashed them
one by one
from the forehead
to the chin,
and he pulled back
the skin,
and left them there,
in Grandfather's barn,
with their revealed
wires and power-packs
disconnected and dead.

Bill Gouge

Night Lights

Lightning bug flash
Dot dot dash your code
Across the darkening twilit lawn.

Cat eyes catch a light,
Glow green beyond an asphalt hairband
Binding stray grasses,
Breeze-blown tresses.

Star bright,
First star I see tonight
Twinkles from shards of broken glass.

Virginia Parkum

This last time, you stuck your hand into my mind via my right ear. It really didn't bother me anymore than the times before. In fact, it really didn't bother me at all. And when you pulled your hand out, you snapped a live wire and brought it out, too, with those long, tapered, surgical fingers of yours. A live wire, steaming in the temperature of the room. Wrapped in kelly green plastic, this hot wire had a protective coat. Sometimes I wish I had one.

Then, oddly enough, you took the wire and inserted the end you had just pulled out into your left ear. Ear to ear, we were. A strange type of love affair, but we were communicating. You said that was foremost.

I think you enjoy pulling wires from my brain — it's like you're the T.V. repairman trying to fix a 1960's black and white Zenith. Some kind of a challenge. But, I'm getting off of the subject.

This green-coated live wire sparked as you inserted it. It held a story all its own and began spilling it out to you. There was nothing I could do about it. I had no control.

Transmitting like a radio, it told you about the falling stars. Thousands of them arching downward in the black space. I watched from the balcony of a mobile home — not a very sturdy perch for star-gazing, but it had to do. A cold, wrought iron railing caught the awe-stricken sweat of my palms, with make-believe green turf under my feet, tickling my toes. But I was a captivated audience only to the stars.

One star, brighter than the others, mesmerized me. Entranced, I watched it fall, coming closer and closer. I wanted it close, but my apprehension created panic in the form of sweat trickling in my eye. I wiped it away, but it continued — as did the star.

Closer and closer the star came, until finally it was no longer a star. An alien spacecraft — lights hitting my eyes like a mirror ball — I could feel the pain of my pupils opening and closing. The ship was round, spinning to its destination. A covered balcony surrounded the metallic exterior. But the lights were a simple spectrum of magenta, blue, violet, gold, and green — all so vividly electric.

The spacecraft came spinning slowly down to the edge of the balcony. I saw there were apparently no doors into the core of this monstrocity. But the balcony enticed me. The lights enticed me. And a dying, brown moth whispered to me, saying I should climb on and take him with me.

From one balcony to another, I stepped over the railings like a hurdler, with "Mr. Moth" in my palm. I walked around the entire massive circumference of the spinning mothership, still finding no doors. Almost forgetting about "Mr. Moth" because of my euphoria, I opened my clenched fist. No "Mr. Moth" — I had held him too tight. His dull colors and fuzzed, bristly body were messily embedded in my palm like a sloppy, ten-cent tatoo. But he still whispered to me of being set free. I didn't understand. I tried to peel him off, but to no avail.

I wanted the ship to move and take me to the shooting stars, but it was like it had dropped anchor in the sky. I climbed over the railings, back onto the artificial turf. The ship vanished, all except for the flashing lights which tormented my eyes. Again, I tried to peel off the decal in my palm, its wings still fluttering just slightly, the sweat in my eyes reflecting the spectrum, but it was permanent. A haunting little pest. And he still whispered to me of freedom. Imagine, him telling me of freedom.

Linda Jennings

I want
to listen
to God's ethereal
pipes
and swallow
their message,
but a
reedy vocal
cord
grows in my throat,
it wants
to sing
a human
song,
and the
ears jumble
the simultaneous
sounds
till they
evolve
into one
hybrid pipe
to my
mind
like thoughts
like serpents
always round,
and cold
I fight
side to side
desert only
to return
years of
civil war
one good,
one bad,
both sides
the same,
and never
the same —
"Gloria in
excelsis deo,"
the vain,
trained,
swallow,
serpent-voice
sings
the heart
pounding
a latin beat
on the
wrong side
of an alley street,
and we bend
in joy
and pain,
pretending at love.
"I love God,"
a nightly prayer
declares.
It rings
like a
cowbell
announcing
the animals
return.
The animal
grows,
we do it
in the
name of love,
we killed
the son
of God,
we bit
the Devil's
shiny apples
only the
animal returns
and the taste
of blood
is becoming
too familiar.
One voice crys,
one voice
sings louder,
the brain
slowly
tilts,
falls.
This joy
is beginning
to burn
bright as
hell's eyes.
I strain to
hear a
dying song —
to make it
live,
by hearing,
decoding,
understanding
it,
but a reggae
beat
defeats
the requiem
buries itself
in retreat.
Only the
guilty knows
who he killed,
and this
son of Cain
shot a hole
through
the telling
part of
his tongue,
and swallowed
like concrete.

Bill Gouge

Lisa Smith

I

Hurry Papa,
Bring the shovel
And pick.
We must dig
Graves and tunnels.

Hurry Papa,
Tomorrow is Monday —
You have work
And I school.

Yes Papa,
I feel fine
But . . .
We must find
Our family
That sleeps
Far beneath
The soil.

Hurry now,
Tomorrow is Monday
You have work
And I school.
And if
By chance
We find the family, Papa,
Tell them
To carry
The shovel and pick
Back home.

II

Yes Mama,
I am going
Underground —
To search
For my sister
Again.

Remember, Mama,
Death lit a match
And she burned.
I'll be able to recognize
Her though —
I saw her photo in the newspaper.

Please Mama,
Get the shovel
And get my jacket, too.
For I must go
And find
My sister.

Yes Mama,
I'll find my sister
Far beneath the ground,
And then we'll come home.
Just remember, Mama,
Death burnt her
But our family buried her.

Cici Stark

Vee

Questions and answers
Fly endlessly in formation.
Canada geese.
Quauk, quauk, quauk
Pattern shifting,
Taking the point by turn,
Buffeting word winds
Across gray winter sky.

Virginia Parkhum

Otterworldly

swimming
diving deep we
furry
ferry across and
down

trailing
braiding our
invisible
liquid ribbons
cords

no
no restraint for
others
otters liquid in
sapphire
space.

K.G. Fesperman

the sky was broken:
sunlight shattering frozen into fractured fragments
falling crystalline
to pelt the ground like hail.
a glaze of ice
lay everywhere
sparkling, covering all with its beautiful coldness and stony silence.
cold pale light, muted, grey
cast watery shadows over the dim landscape
like long bony fingers, reaching out to grasp
the ancient mouldering hills.

Undercurrents

The world walks
three inches
above the earth
on a shiny glass
package,
They can't see the ground
only reflections
(eyes can't be believed,)
I learned how
to untie the bow,
I raised the
metallic hatch
and crawled in,
the worm
in the apple,
I saw telescopic.
I can't be me,
I know how to see
Oh Eve, Eve
you knew not
to laugh or cry
at things that are
you knew that they
are not.
Space glitter,
apples of truth,
bitten and digested,
they come
like falling stars
at your feet
once in a lifetime,
Time was not,
and I saw
past and future
both present,
and Eve played
games with Adam,
like a green man
from space
she understood
all,
and had to hide it.

She had to see
the trees
Adam drew
shade under,
though they were
not.
He came home
from work
and said with
a sigh,
"I named all
the animals
on earth
today,"
"That's nice dear,"
she said with
a knowing smile.
I am Eve,
I am Eve
from space
I know.

Bill Gouge

The boards, were raw, smooth and raw like
a wall — Pictures/plastic frame/Jesus's Halo —
Photograph of young girl, long black hair, free
as a crow in the wind.
The hair in drab reality — twisted, twisted
like Mad Medusa's Mane — the roots inside
head crawling — the mind shrinking —
wild scenes inside — Dracula Dreams —

She Moaned that little girl, cigarette girl
dumb blond moan — Mad as Lady McBeth mouth —
agape — time irrelevant — hospitals fade into
hospitals to grey — Only Jesus beams —
She screams —
insects —
flies away in Wonder Woman's invisible
plane,
Like a heroine to
save the
day —
Saves enough money
to paper
the raw walls,
coat
them,
mute them —
sanity is the world's trick —
the walls emerge
through the
paper,
they whisper
like music,
only she
knows the song.

Bill Gouge

And see it bloomed, Mary,
It's a lot like me —
It sits on rock walls
And waits for the numbness
That fills its stems
To give over to spring,
Like a heyday of repose,
Elegant,
Not needing to move
To impress,
And one day,
One day Mary —
It'll get so big
It can climb these walls —
Creep right on over the sides
Like a question without
An answer —
And listen to the wind.

Denise Boerckel

Ruler

Poets measure their verse.
Artists etch their measured lines.
Musicians play and write in measures.
We measure our thoughts,
Fear to break rhythms,
Dread to slur the rhyme
Or turn the flow of
Our carefully measured time.

Virginia Parkum

Linda Jennings
A contributor from Charlotte, N.C., and an alumna of Queens College.

Denise Boerckel
A senior at Queens College from Augusta, Ga., and a member of Sigma Upsilon.

Tonya Wertz
A sophomore at Queens College from Thomasville, N.C., and a member of Sigma Upsilon.

K.G. Fesperman
A senior at Queens College from Asheville, N.C., and a member of Sigma Upsilon.

Bill Gouge
A senior at Queens College from Burnsville, N.C., and a member of Sigma Upsilon.

Ann Matthews
A contributor from Charlotte, N.C.

Alvin Johnson
A contributor from Charlotte, N.C.

Virginia Parkum
A contributor from Charlotte, N.C.

Sharon Culp
A senior at Queens College from Charlotte, N.C.

Jane McKinnon
A senior at Queens College from Charlotte, N.C., and a member of Sigma Upsilon.

Dena Nixon
A contributor from Charlotte, N.C.

Mary Ann Farrell
A contributor from Hickory, N.C.

Carla Van Cleve
A junior at Queens College from Centreville, Miss., and a member of Sigma Upsilon.

Jane Splawn
A senior at Queens College from Campobello, S.C., and a member of Sigma Upsilon.

Susan Westphal
A junior at Queens College from Alexandria, Va., and a member of Sigma Upsilon.

Lisa Smith
A junior at Queens College from Bessemer City, N.C.

CiCi Stark
A sophomore at Queens College from Charlotte, N.C., and a member of Sigma Upsilon.

Susie Fagerburg
A contributor from Atlanta, Ga.

Carol Mercer
A junior art major at Queens College from Tampa, Fla.

Jennifer Smith
A freshman art major at Queens from Valdosta, Ga.

Irene Hurst
A senior at Queens College from LaGrange, Ga.

Signet Staff — Spring 1980

Denise Boerckel — Editor
Kathy Fesperman — Editor
Tonya Wertz
Bill Gouge
Allison Christian
Linda Jennings
Alvin Johnson
Jane McKinnon
Carla Van Cleve
Jane Splawn
Susan Westphal
CiCi Stark
Deborah Rogers

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